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# Operation Neighborhood Shield Creates Community Trust and Reduces Crime

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Community corrections is in the process of reinventing itself. Over the last 2 decades it has lived in the shadow cast by jails and prisons. It has sought to sell itself to political leaders and funding agencies as an alternative to incarceration and an intermediate form of punishment without bars. It has tried to convince the public that it too can be tough on crime, that it too can be a sanction with “zero tolerance.” As a result, community corrections has fallen between the proverbial stools. It has been relegated to the position of a necessary but poor relation in the family of criminal justice, always under-funded and frequently ignored in the councils of policymaking.

This image of community corrections as an appendage of institutional corrections began to change when a fresh wind blew in from the north. A group of determined Canadian researchers repulsed the notion, first stated by the American Robert Martinson, that treatment does not work in dealing with criminal clients. Gathering themselves under the banner of “What Works,” these scholars demonstrated that treatment does work for some offenders, some of the time, in some circumstances.

They made this important discovery by reviewing the existing literature of correctional rehabilitation using a sophisticated process of meta-analysis. They provided to the profession the important concepts of criminogenic risk, need, and responsivity and developed the practical tools of cognitive-behavioral interventions with offenders. They also found that the basis of institutional corrections, the principle of punishment, was fundamentally flawed as a means of positively changing criminal behavior. By placing offenders in an incarcerative environment where anti-social attitudes and beliefs prevailed and where the dominant role models were other anti-social inmates, recidivism was bound to increase rather than decline.

“What Works” concentrated on the rehabilitation of the individual correctional client. Now, a second wave of reform in the profession has begun to engage the community as an important factor in crime prevention. Less developed than its psychological predecessor, it presently goes under a variety of names, including Balanced and Restorative Justice, “Broken Windows” Probation, and Community Justice. Although there are important differences among these models for conducting our business, each agrees on the basic principle that a focus on the environment of crime can be just as important in its reduction as dealing with the individuals committing the crime. Indeed, the two elements must go hand in hand for community corrections to be successful in achieving its

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mission of enhancing public safety. While effective case management deals with the criminogenic factors affecting correctional clients' future actions, community justice ensures their successful reintegration into their neighborhoods by providing the personal and institutional supports required for pro-social behavior and the prevention of recidivism.

### Profile: Operation Neighborhood Shield, New York, New York

**Partner agencies:**

New York City Department of Probation  
New York City Police Department  
Manhattan Institute  
Community leaders, through Citizens Advisory Board  
Community Justice Initiative, a program of the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services  
Family Justice Center  
Kings County District Attorney  
Kings Family, Criminal, and Supreme Courts  
Faith-based community  
Elected officials

**Purpose:**

Neighborhood Shield is a program of crime prevention and reduction that integrates the best in each of the current conceptual models of community justice. Probation and police work together with citizens to create a forum in which the residents of a given community are equal partners in fighting crime and meeting community needs.

**Launched:** 2000

The New York City Department of Probation has participated actively in furthering these new models of doing the business of probation. Starting in 1992, it initiated a massive project to reengineer the process of supervising adult offenders. Known as Adult Supervision Restructuring, this initiative shifted the focus of supervision from a contact basis to a programmatic emphasis based on the risk, need, and responsivity of the probationer. We introduced cognitive-behavioral groups for young male offenders at high risk of violent recidivism and automated reporting kiosks for thousands of low-risk offenders. This work of transformation was conducted in close contact with the Canadian and other scholars who had founded the "What Works" movement, including Don Andrews, Paul Gendreau, James Bonta, Marilyn Van Diemen, and Pat Van Voorhis. Although the results are still in the process of being evaluated, subjective indicators demonstrate that we are on the right path for reducing probationer recidivism in the City.

All of which now brings us to our latest project, Neighborhood Shield. Recognizing that it was an act of futility to focus simply on "curing" the correctional client without also dealing with the criminogenic environment that had fostered his or her anti-social activities in the first place, we established strong links with the Reinventing Probation Council, the authors of "Broken Windows" probation; Todd Clear and David Karp, the initiators of the community justice movement; and Mark Carey and his associates, who have been instrumental in the balanced and restorative justice movement. Together we have sought to develop a program of crime prevention and reduction that integrates the best in each of these conceptual models.

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## Conceiving an Approach

As with so many problems in our field, the events leading up to the development of New York City's community justice initiative were political in origin. In August 1999 the City's Criminal Justice Coordinator, Steven Fishner, and Dr. John DiIulio, Jr., of the Manhattan Institute approached Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to discuss the recently released "Broken Windows" report and the possibility of applying some of its concepts in the New York City Department of Probation. The result was Operation Neighborhood Shield.

The probation department immediately assembled a planning team to ensure that the political opportunity was not lost. The goal was to develop a plan and "bring it up" within 6 months. The first step for the team was to become familiar with existing initiatives that were associated with the "Broken Windows" model. Both Boston's Nightlight and Maryland's Hotspots programs were reviewed. It became clear to the team after visiting these and other jurisdictions and talking to the dedicated professionals associated with them that an extremely complicated challenge lay ahead. Offenders function in a symbiotic relationship with the physical environment. To make an impact on one would require us to make an impact on the other.

In 1999, Brooklyn's 75th Precinct had one of the highest crime rates in New York City and a probation population of over 1,200 high-risk offenders. In agreement and partnership with the New York City Police Department, the probation department established a Community Based Response Team (CBRT) site in the public housing authority complex Cyprus Hills, located in the East New York section of Brooklyn. The site housed both police and armed probation officers working in teams. The teams would contact probationers in their homes, conduct compliance checks, talk to and work with families, meet with treatment providers, obtain and act upon warrants, and generally act as the eyes and ears of the case management probation officers. The case management officers, although physically located in municipal center office buildings, would frequently travel to the CBRT site to meet with families and probationers. They also joined members of the CBRT staff for joint case management discussions, problem solving, and decision making.

In addition to performing the traditional duties assigned to probation officers, members of the CBRT team also conducted general police operations not directly related to probationers. While on-site at housing authority buildings to contact probationers, the teams walked down stairwells, conducting vertical patrols to apprehend lawbreakers. They also participated in strategy meetings at the local precinct to discuss crime trends and to map out independent law enforcement operations, which became known in the community as "Shield" operations.

## Public Buy-In

At this point, Operation Neighborhood Shield might have seemed a standard model of police-probation collaboration. However, an interesting phenomenon was occurring, one that proved to be the most exciting aspect of our work. The

public on its own initiative began providing strategic information to the CBRT site regarding crime, its perpetrators, and a host of other intelligence. In an environment in which police motives may be suspect, the community was coming forward and volunteering information. What accounted for this behavior?

From the beginning, the probation department knew that it could not impose on the neighborhood a traditional model of public safety based on the notion that government always knows best. Instead, we needed to create a forum in which the residents of a given community could bring to bear their “expertise” in fighting crime. Our job was simply to “get at” that information and join in equal partnership with citizens to access resources to meet their needs.

Acting in concert with criminal justice consultants made available by the Manhattan Institute, we conducted a series of focus groups in the target area to identify local problems requiring resolution. Questionnaires were distributed at community meetings to help identify both law enforcement and other (non-enforcement) issues. Community leaders, interested citizens, and community-based organizations were asked to volunteer for a Citizen’s Advisory Board, which would help guide the work of probation officers and police in the neighborhood. The group identified several subcommittees to work on issues of concern.

We have also been very ably assisted in this work by the Community Justice Initiative (CJI), a program of the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services. CJI is designed to build working partnerships between correctional agencies and community organizations in neighborhoods where a high proportion of residents are incarcerated or under some form of community correctional supervision. It has helped us make the community more informed partners, and through community mapping, CJI has helped community organizers assess neighborhood capacity and identify community strengths upon which to build participation.

The probation department has hired a number of community activists to serve as community liaison workers to supplement the Citizen’s Advisory Board. On a daily basis these activists funnel information to and from the community, the probation department, and the police. They were instrumental in developing asset maps of the community. In conjunction with a community service probation officer and the other armed personnel already discussed, the community activists became equal members of the local CBRT team.

Our efforts in the community have netted very positive results. A level of trust and respect has developed such that community residents have taken enormous initiative in alerting us to crimes in progress and situations that need to be corrected to discourage or stop criminal activity. One example is an abandoned lot where drug trafficking was occurring. Clearing the lot not only added to the quality of life in the neighborhood, but also removed the places where dealers could hide their drugs.

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## Principles of Success

Operation Neighborhood Shield operates on two fundamental principles. First, there is no issue presented to us by the community—whether criminal justice related or not—for which we are not willing to serve as ombudsman or facilitator in seeking a solution. “It’s not my job” is simply not part of the vocabulary of community justice. Second, the lengthy bureaucratic processes previously required to deal with problems had to be curtailed so that a citizen could observe a direct connection between a request and the ameliorative action. This has required a close working relationship with other municipal agencies, which are often called upon to assist in correcting problems. These principles reinforced the growing trust the community had in our effort to protect it. Neighborhood Shield is so identified with problem solving and a “can do” attitude that when a group of local residents recently sought help from a municipal agency to remove old tires from a pond, the first place they were sent was to Neighborhood Shield.

Constant communication and collaboration among all stakeholders in the project have also been key factors in achieving success. The Probation Department has had excellent cooperation from the courts and district attorneys. By establishing a specialized compliance court for Neighborhood Shield, we have been able to bring offenders back before the court periodically to review their progress with the judge. Encouragement and support for all positive behavior are key parts of the process. When a case must move to violation, however, it appears on the court’s calendar twice as fast as a normal case and reaches final disposition in a fraction of the time usually required. Moreover, 93% of Neighborhood Shield probationers favorably exit the program.

Operation Neighborhood Shield has had its share of problems, not the least of which has been different definitions and measures of success. At the outset, the police believed that success could be measured by the volume of arrests. The probation department believed that the reduction in crime generated by the treatment of offenders, combined with strict accountability and other preventive actions, were the true measures of effectiveness. *The New York Times* reported this spring that the 75th Precinct in Brooklyn led the city in overall crime reduction.

To be sure, this collaborative initiative is a work in progress, constantly redefining its capabilities. Major efforts are under way with the faith-based community to establish mentorship programs for youth, and linkages are already in place to increase access to employment opportunities. Likewise, through the assistance of the Family Justice Center, we are improving our ability to understand and work with the offender’s family constellation. It is our hope that by late 2001 the components of the program will have stabilized sufficiently to begin a formal process and outcome evaluation. Only then will we truly know whether “What Works” and “Broken Windows” can together conquer the mean streets of New York City. ■

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